

Portal is entry point for Air Force information

by Tech Sgt. Carl Norman, AFMC Public Affairs

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AFB, Ohio (AFMCNS) – The single Air Force information portal Version 1.0 opened to Air Force Materiel Command people in January, with the eventual goal of giving its members one-stop information shopping at their desktop.

In the future the portal will consolidate data from hundreds of information systems across the Air Force with one single point of entry, according to Capt. Mark Human, AFMC's plans and implementation technical director. This will provide added security as well as reduce costs. Users can access the portal from a standard web browser using a secure ".mil" network.

AFMC will issue 6,900 licenses, or access authorizations, in its initial activation. About 900 of those will go to people at the headquarters here while the other 6,000 go to people at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., who will act as a test bed, Human said.

He also said that by the end of January, AFMC would request an additional 8,000 licenses to be distributed to all AFMC bases. Every Air Force user should have access to the portal by June 2001.

"The portal is a tool every user will have on their desktop that allows them to get all the information they need to do their jobs," Human said. "It will be the one entry point to the majority of information you may need from any Air Force source."

Human said the integrated logistics area at the Air Force level has some of their automated information systems on the portal, and it is already bearing fruit.

"When it comes to information about aircraft and depot repair items, the IL folks said it normally takes five to seven days to find out typical information on where the breakdown was for getting parts and getting planes back in flight," he said. "Now, just putting them on the portal, they're able to do that same task in minutes versus days."

AFMC plans to work with all the functional areas, mission areas and bases to integrate their AISs into the Air Force portal during the next few years.

The portal, mandated by Air Force Secretary F. Whitten Peters and Chief of Staff Gen. Michael Ryan, promises to increase productivity, reduce duplication and allow people from all around the Air Force to share information. This is, according to Human, what industry leaders say is required for the Air Force to become information centric and save time and money – basically to achieve information superiority.

In the increased productivity scheme, the Air Force will reduce duplication by providing a robust search engine that facilitates leveraging and re-using corporate information.

"Currently we sometimes re-generate the same report multiple times because we don't have the tools to publish and share the information products across the community," said Jackie Murray, AFMC communications and information technical advisor. "With the portal, we'll be able to share information and avoid some of these repetitive costs. The search engine will help people find the information they need."

This ability to instantly share information is something Human said the Air Force doesn't have right now, but the portal is the road leading there.

"Everyone seems to be on their own when it comes to gathering information and that's the big driver behind this – having all the information you'll need at your fingertips," he said.

Along with these savings come the cost avoidances standardizing technologies will bring, according to Human. He cited the time when there were nearly as many different e-mail systems being used as there were Air Force bases, and many of those didn't communicate well with each other.

"When we standardized the e-mail, we were able to communicate more efficiently and cut down on the number of e-mail systems we had," he said. "It's the same thing with the portal."

"By using the portal, we standardize our software and leverage our purchasing power. Once we standardize, we can buy at the Air Force level instead of each base or organization having to go out on their

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own.”

But cost savings and cost avoidance alone aren't good enough reasons to implement the portal, according to Human. He said a somewhat inflexible Air Force technological outlook is like a lock and the portal is the key to flexibility by allowing each user to customize his or her desktop to have all the information they need right there – all the time.

“If a parts manager at Wright-Patterson is moved to Hickam (Air Force Base, Hawaii), he or she can have the same desktop set up and access to the same information in Hawaii that they had in Ohio,” he said. “This gives the user a consistent view of the variety of systems and data they need to execute their mission, regardless of what major command they're in or environment they're deployed to.”

And all this is especially good news for the warfighter, who Human said this technology is all about.

“All this information, all those different systems, the aircraft repair information and the weapons systems that are out there, when collaboratively brought together will create huge improvements in managing knowledge vital for the air operations center folks and leaders at all levels,” Human said. “They'll be able to instantly have a picture of how their command, center or wing shapes up rather than having to wait on reports that could take weeks to generate.”

Human said if the Air Force doesn't go to this type of environment, “We will be that much farther behind industry and possibly our adversaries who are keeping up with technology. And, it will negatively impact our ability to conduct e-business and e-commerce.

“The most successful companies are able to quickly establish corporate partnerships and share and leverage corporate information,” he said. “This type of tool will help us adapt to that type of environment where we're able to create the partnerships with industry, have a mechanism for sharing information, and make our partners aware of where we're moving in this area.” @